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Strategic Insight

Will Saddam Seek to Extend His Presidency?

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May, 2002

As the war on terrorism in Afghanistan winds down, attention turns to the next steps to be taken. Iraq ranks high in the discussions.

From Baghdad's perspective, however, the current situation might not look so bad. Under the recent supervision of Qusai, Saddam Hussein's son, Iraq's foreign relations have been reshuffled. Relations with Iran have warmed; the process of exchanging prisoners of war has started. The Arab summit in Beirut resulted in an agreement with Kuwait on a similar issue. High-level discussions with the United Nations resumed last month. There is strong international resistance to a large-scale military assault against Iraq. Oil exports have loosened and a quarter of the oil sold by Iraq is exported to the United States. The embargo is crippled; diplomatic and economic relations with the Arab world are improving.

Diplomatic and political developments over the coming months offer additional opportunities. The United Nations Security Council may finalise its debate on "smart sanctions", expected to replace the current "Oil for Food" programme when its eleventh phase expires on May 29th. In July and August, the United Kingdom and the United States will successively preside over the Security Council, which might be perceived in Baghdad as a time when Iraq could receive an ultimatum to comply with its international obligations. Finally on the 22nd of October 2002, Saddam Hussein's mandate as President of Iraq will expire, which implies that a new referendum or elections may be organised soon by Baghdad. This will happen just weeks before the mid-term elections in the United States. The question is will Saddam Hussein -- who recently turned 65, an age when people in most developing countries are contemplating their retirement -- and the Revolutionary Command Council go for a new extension of his mandate after steering Iraq for twenty-three years?

Given the current uncertainties, Saddam may opt for announcing a referendum or even elections in early autumn this year, leaving to the future President the latitude to set policy vis-à-vis the Security Council Resolution 1284 and the return of the United Nations inspectors. Going even further, should Saddam decide not to run for an additional mandate, he might support the candidacy of his son Qusai, whose power base has steadily grown since 1995.

Whether Saddam might opt for such moves will depend on his perception of internal and external threats, as well as his sense of his own physical health. Such an approach could formalize Qusai's ascension, maintaining the family's grip on power and averting internal clan struggle. It may well cut short any Iraqi National Congress proposition of an alternative leader, although this appears unlikely. Definitely this approach would buy time, postponing the monitoring of Iraq for several months, while nominally leaving a door open to U.N. efforts. Additionally it may put Washington out of step in the international arena in its drive to change the Iraqi leadership, while preserving Qusai's impulse to revitalize Iraq's foreign diplomacy. But such a move would be bitter for Saddam to swallow, as it would be interpreted as a victory for Washington.

From a western point of view, such calculations are not likely to weaken the Bush administration's determination to trash the traditional "double containment" policy, topple the regime despite the absence of unambiguous proof that Baghdad is linked to the 9-11 terrorist attacks, and ensure that all weapons of mass destruction have been eliminated from Iraq. But it may provide Washington with an opportunity to postpone the launch of a controversial large-scale military campaign, while managing for a decrease of the cycle of violence between Palestinians and Israelis, which otherwise would strengthen Arab outrage against the United States.

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